

VZCZCXRO2736
OO RUEHDE
DE RUEHMK #1799/01 2911112
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 181112Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5790
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001799

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2016

TAGS: PGOV KDEM PHUM BA POL REFORM

SUBJECT: ELECTION MONITORING: GOB MOVES TOWARD GREATER
TRANSPARENCY

REF: A. MANAMA 1728

1B. MANAMA 1691

Classified By: CDA Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) The High Commission for Elections announced October 16 that any registered Bahraini civil society group will be allowed to monitor the November 25 elections. Most societies welcomed the announcement, but Bahrain Human Rights Society continued to push the GOB to allow international monitors, even though earlier indications from King Hamad were that independent, domestic monitors were sufficient. Judges from the Ministry of Justice responsible for forming a committee of observers did not completely reject the idea of international monitors, but have yet to give a public decision on a Jordanian NGO's request to observe. End summary.

12. (SBU) The High Commission for Elections announced October 16 that any registered Bahraini civil society group would be permitted to monitor the November 25 parliamentary and municipal council elections. The decision came after civil society groups pressured the GOB to allow independent monitoring rather than monitoring by a committee formed by Bahrain's judiciary. Societies wishing to participate must notify the High Commission of their intent in writing by November 10. They will then have through November 15 to present information about the individuals who will be involved. Although this decision was welcomed by most civil society groups, Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) assistant secretary general and spokesman Dr. Abdulla Al Derazi said

SIPDIS
that the decision did not go far enough because it did not allow for international monitors. The High Commission's guidelines for monitors, who will be allowed to observe vote-casting and vote-counting in addition to candidate activities, specify that monitors must be Bahraini. They further restrict election candidates and political society members from participating as monitors.

13. (C) Al Derazi told Poloff October 17 that although the Commission's announcement does increase transparency on election day itself, the Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS)/BHRS monitoring plan is much more robust. It has already been under way for some time and will extend past election day. The two societies will participate in the application process with the Commission to obtain access badges to polling stations, but will not coordinate their monitoring with other societies. Trained volunteers will be included on BTS' and BHRS' registration lists.

Movement to Allow Monitors

14. (C) For the past several months the public message from (now former) elections chairman Shaikh Ahmed Bin Attiyatallah Al Khalifa, Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and Director of the Central Informatics Organization (CIO), was that there would be no observers for the November 25 parliamentary and municipal elections. He said that judges from the Ministry of Justice were to be responsible for ensuring that the elections are free and fair. (Note: BTS president Dr. Jasim Al Ajmi told Poloff that in 2002 a similar chain of events occurred until the final week before the elections when King Hamad intervened to allow members of BTS and BHRS, and volunteers the two societies had trained, to observe the elections. End note.) In response to public statements of intent from both BHRS and BTS that they would monitor the elections in defiance of Shaikh Ahmed's orders, Minister of Social Development Dr. Fatima Al Balooshi stated publicly that civil society groups would not be allowed to monitor the elections because their society by-laws did not include election monitoring. However, Al Balooshi offered a plan to involve civil society groups on a Ministry committee to "follow" the election. Civil society groups were unenthusiastic.

15. (SBU) Meanwhile, BHRS representatives forged ahead to prepare volunteers to observe the elections, as they had done in 2002. For three days beginning September 17, BHRS hosted a training in cooperation with the Amman Center for Human Rights covering the role of the media during the elections and election monitoring. Approximately 35 volunteers participated. Just before the training Al Derazi said publicly that by election time there would be approximately 200 volunteer monitors stationed around the country at

MANAMA 00001799 002 OF 003

polling stations to monitor the vote.

Enter the Bandar Report

16. (C) As the furor surrounding the release of the Al Bandar report (Ref A) grew and critics of the CIO became more vocal, the Ministry of Justice took a more visible role in the preparation for the elections. The High Commission for Elections, chaired by Minister of Justice Dr. Mohamed Ali Al Sitri, appointed Wael Bu'alay, head of the Public Prosecutor's Office, to be Executive Director for the elections in place of Shaikh Ahmed. A group of judges, including Bu'alay, met with nine civil society organizations to discuss observation of the elections. Initial indications were that the judges would decide who would take part in observation and who would not, but in light of the most recent announcement, this is not now the case. Meanwhile, the role of the CIO in the election process has declined to the point where it is only providing data and technical assistance. As for Shaikh Ahmed himself, Al Ajmi told Poloff that he had spoken to Shaikh Ahmed by phone and he was not in Bahrain; he said he needed "some time away."

17. (C) Al Ajmi expressed his pleasure with the turnaround in the GOB attitude toward election observation, outlining the progression from no independent observers, to a committee chosen by the Ministry of Social Development to "follow" the election, to observers chosen by judges at the Ministry of Justice, to allowing civil societies to form a committee themselves to monitor the election. However, Al Ajmi still wanted to push for more independence from the government and for involvement of international observers.

International Observers

¶8. (C) Although King Hamad himself indicated during a meeting September 20 with political society leaders that there was no need for international observers during the election, BTS and BHRS have continued to bring the issue of international observers before government officials. Most recently, on October 8 they lobbied for international observers before the committee of judges tasked with organizing the observation committee. According to Al Ajmi, the judges did not dismiss the request immediately, but simply responded that no international organizations had requested to be involved in monitoring. Since that time a Jordanian NGO has sent a proposal to the Ministry of Justice requesting that it participate, but the Ministry has not made a decision yet on the request. Al Ajmi remains optimistic there may be room for international observers. He said he senses that the judges are deferring increasingly to BTS and BHRS to give the elections more legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

NGO Conflicts

¶9. (SBU) The press has carried several articles describing conflicts among NGOs interested in serving on the committee, many of whom accuse each other of insufficient independence and objectivity. On October 14, before the announcement by the Ministry of Justice welcoming any civil society group to participate in election observation, the Bahrain Quality Society accused BTS and BHRS of trying to exclude it from the civil society observation committee. Al Ajmi explained that BTS' concern was that the observation committee should not be formed by the judiciary (the Quality Society's position) but should be formed by civil society groups themselves to ensure independence. On another front, BTS and BHRS have both advocated that any person or group implicated in the Bandar Report not be included in election monitoring, including the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society and its most outspoken member, Shura Council member Faisal Fulad. Fulad has reacted calling BTS and BHRS exclusionary and labeling them PONGOs (Political NGOs).

Comment

¶10. (C) In the aftermath of the release of the Bandar report, the King and other government officials have been concerned that the elections be seen to be free and fair and have therefore given ground on election monitoring. GOB officials recognize that the public perceives BTS and BHRS to

MANAMA 00001799 003 OF 003

be objective, unbiased organizations that will lend credibility to the election process and the vote itself. Although the entrance of what could be dozens of civil society groups into election observation may increase the perception of transparency, substantive feedback on the election will still come from groups with experience and training such as BTS, BHRS, and trained international observers, if they are allowed.

Visit Embassy Manama's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/manama/>

ZIADEH